

JS Bach: BWV 118

If only, if only, such numinous music - lasting just over eight minutes of Earthly time - could affect for the better those who now in our modern Western world wield such power as affects and governs our societies and causes such persons to once again dishonourably sanction destruction and deaths in other lands as if such destruction and deaths would, could, ensure that such power and governance would continue for they themselves and the societies they in their hubris believed in and represented.

Hubris indeed, for our thousands of year old human culture of pathei-mathos reveals how our societies, just as we mere mortals, are organic in physis and thus are born, grow, and inevitably decline and pass away.

It is as if the allegory of the message, the persecution, the cruel death, of Jesus - so kept alive for centuries by Julian of Norwich, by others, and by those who even today venture to undertake the Pilgrimage of Compostela - is irrelevant to them. As irrelevant as our thousands of year old human culture of pathei-mathos is to them, with its personal experiences of war, persecution, terror, suffering, destruction and death. [1]

But, that such allegories, such numinous music [2] is still remembered by some perhaps presents a few of we mortals with Hope. As Hesiod wrote thousands of years ago,

σὺ δ' ἄκουε δίκης, μηδ' ὕβριν ὄφελλε:
ὑβρις γάρ τε κακὴ δειλῷ βροτῷ: οὐδὲ μὲν ἐσθλὸς
ῥηιδίως φερέμεν δύναται, βαρύθει δέ θ' ὑπ' αὐτῆς
ἐγκύρσας ἄτησιν: ὁδὸς δ' ἐτέρηφι παρελθεῖν
κρείσσων ἐς τὰ δίκαια: Δίκη δ' ὑπὲρ ὕβριος ἴσχει
ἐς τέλος ἐξελθοῦσα: παθὼν δέ τε νήπιος ἔγνω

You should listen to [the goddess] Fairness and not oblige Hubris
Since Hubris harms unfortunate mortals while even the more fortunate
Are not equal to carrying that heavy a burden, meeting as they do with Mischief.
The best path to take is the opposite one: that of honour
For, in the end, Fairness is above Hubris
Which is something the young come to learn from adversity. [3]

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January 24th 2024

[1] qv. *Education And The Culture Of Pathei-Mathos*, <https://web.archive.org/web/20230606193740/https://www.davidmyatt.info/education-pathei-mathos.html>

[2] As BWV 118 was for example performed recently by the Netherlands Bach Society.

[3] Ἔργα καὶ Ἡμέραι, vv 213-218. Notes on the translation:

a. δίκη. The goddess of Fairness/Justice/Judgement, and – importantly – of Tradition (Ancestral Custom). In Ἔργα καὶ Ἡμέραι, as in Θεογονία (Theogony), Hesiod is recounting and explaining part of that tradition, one important aspect of which tradition is understanding the relation between the gods and mortals. Given both the antiquity of the text and the context, 'Fairness' – as the name of the goddess – is, in my view, more appropriate than the now common appellation 'Justice', considering the modern (oft times impersonal) connotations of the word 'justice'.

b. Mischief. The sense of ἄτησιν here is not of 'delusion' nor of 'calamities', per se, but rather of encountering that which or those whom (such as the goddess of mischief, Ἄτη) can bring mischief or misfortune into the 'fortunate life' of a 'fortunate mortal', and which encounters are, according to classical tradition, considered as having been instigated by the gods. Hence, of course, why Sophocles [Antigone, 1337-8] wrote ὡς πεπρωμένης οὐκ ἔστι θνητοῖς συμφορᾶς ἀπαλλαγὴ (mortals cannot be delivered from the misfortunes of their fate).

c. δίκαιος. Honour expresses the sense that is meant: of being fair; capable of doing the decent thing; of dutifully observing ancestral customs. A reasonable alternative for 'honour' would thus be 'decency', both preferable to words such as 'just' and 'justice' which are not only too impersonal but have too many inappropriate modern connotations.

d. νήπιος. Literal – 'young', 'uncultured' (i.e. un-schooled, un-educated in the ways of ancestral custom) – rather than metaphorical ('foolish', ignorant).
